

Harold's Coming

By Peter Derk

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Trouble is easy to trace back, and this trouble traces straight to the beer night where I found out the opposite of my naked high school geometry teacher. That there's a such thing as the opposite of a naked geometry teacher.

We're at the bar. Well, at the tables off away from the bar, the place old guys sit because the music isn't so loud.

My buddy Stan grabs his phone off the table so he can see the screen. The Spider-Man case on his phone a thick, bright red block. The case isn't just a Spider-Man logo or a drawing, it's actual Spider-Man, his whole body, wide and rectangular. His stubby toes pop out from the phone's back in 3D, same with his hands, his face. The whole thing way too big to fit in a pocket. Stan says.

I say he's just always representing, it's his comic fanboy flag.

He must've seen me look. He brushes off the Spider-Man case and says, "Carol hated it. But with Neveah, it's a lot easier."

Nevaeh. That's right, that's her name. The new woman, the one who lets the guy old enough to be her dad put a Spider-Man case on his phone and drink the tall beers, the bazookas, at our monthly meet-ups.

Stan scrolls on his phone and says, "Trust me, this'll be worth it. Saved my marriage."

I wait until he says, "Okay, well, like a couple months of my marriage. The sex part, anyway."

He glides his finger over the screen until he finds what he's looking for and taps.

"Okay, here we go." He sets the phone on the table and turns it to face me.

"I didn't bring my readers," I say.

He spins the phone to face him again. "Okay, first question, what's the opposite of cornbread?"

With my mug tilted back towards me, my mouth still on the glass rim, my laugh spits beer back into the mug, the small kind of mug that still married people get.

I say, "What does cornbread have to do with sex?"

Stan sets Spider-Man down on the table, pulls his bazooka beer closer, and he karate chops his answer. It's his thing he does, sets his hand hard in a karate shape and chops out the words.

"Well, what it really says is 'What is being opposite of cornbread?'" Hand chop.

"Listen, buddy. That's how this works. It's opposites." Chop. "Remember when you were like 16 and first getting some sex on a regular basis?"

Stan's known me since middle school and knows it was a lot later than 16, but I let it go.

He says, "And how back then there was stuff you'd think about to, like, slow down?"

My little married person mug is empty so soon. I can come home on two beers, no problem. Three would be the upper. But four? The marriage isn't going four beers good at the moment.

He says, "Okay, for me, it was Amazing Spider-Man. Key issues," He picks up his phone, points to the case. "If I was about to blast and it was too early, I'd think, 'Issue 25, first Mary Jane Watson. 121, Death of Gwen Stacy.' Just to take my mind off what was happening. Trick I learned from my dad."

The bartender walks by and Stan asks for a third bazooka. And I decide to go crazy and have that third tiny beer, the first step to a bed on the couch. When Stan starts in on comics, it's a three-beer night.

I say, "Your dad told you to think about Spider-Man."

Stan says, "My dad said to think about a grandma naked on a pile of garbage."

The new, full beers hit the table, the fresh bazooka's weight rattles the table and the Spider-Man phone. We wait until the bartender walks away and I say, "He told you to think about his mother, naked, in the trash?"

Stan lifts the full bazooka beer with both hands and talks into his glass. "He said A grandma, not MY grandma. Anyway, it worked. I'll give him that." He drinks, then picks up Spider-Man and taps the screen to wake it up. "I don't know, it's an algorithm or something. You answer some questions, then they send you the opposite of whatever would slow you down. I don't know how it works, but it works."

I say, "They send like pills or something?"

He says, "Not pills, a thing. An object."

I say, "And this works?"

"Best sex of my married life."

The rest of the questions are just as weird as the opposite of cornbread.

What's the opposite of a horse?

What's the opposite of Halloween?

Stan fights me on every answer, but what can you do? There's no opposite of a horse or Halloween or a fireplace.

The last question, "What's the image you'd bringing up to your mind to slowen the process of sexual climax moment arriving with too speed?"

I tell him.

Mrs. H. Our geometry teacher from high school. Stan doesn't remember right off, but I remind him how she'd run out of chalkboard and then draw an arrow from the bottom, and she'd reach way up to the space on the top to finish a math problem, and when she lifted her arm, her shirt lifted and her belly showed. And the dark hair on the bottom of her belly, south of her belly button.

I say, "Her. Naked. That did it."

Stan starts typing and says, "Wow."

We wait. The screen shows a spinning clock, and Stan reads the text out loud, "Please waiting while I discover answers to you." He smacks his lips. "You know, she just wanted to teach you to factor polynomials."

The clock spins through the last mouthful from my last tiny beer before Stan's phone pings. "Whoa," he says. "Pricey."

"What is it?" I say.

He pulls out his wallet, velcro crunch, also with Spider-Man on the outside, and says, "I don't know, they don't tell you what it is, you just have to wait. Listen." Chop. "It's on me."

I pull out my card, he karate chops, a quick swipe that almost touches my hand. "Stop. I'm not typing in your number, and you didn't bring your readers." Chop.

He finishes up, then picks up his bazooka and tops up my little beer.

When you get in a real routine with your wife, a tight one, like if you never get the mail, you can't change without questions. And if the questions are about a mystery package, probably shaped like a huge penis, or maybe just a sex doll with a shipping label slapped on her forehead, what you do is roll home every day during lunch, check for your mystery package, then leave the bills and the ads in the box like you were never there.

My package comes fast, and it's the opposite of a sex doll. Because the opposite of a sex doll with a shipping label slapped on her forehead is definitely a flat mailer with a book inside.

That's all. This thin, colorful book, the kind you read when you're a kid.

The front has that face everyone spent their childhood looking for. Harold. In his round glasses and his candy-cane striped ski hat with the poof ball on top, matching candy cane sweater.

Here's Harold.

The book looks like every other *Here's Harold* book, but it's sealed with ribbons crossed tight over the front cover. Tucked into the ribbons, a note:

Greetings

From our company. We provided items of assistance to pleasure to many people just like you. Understand that by opening up this package up, you are responsible for what follows. You may not seek a refund anymore, but you may choosen to not open your item.

I didn't need the warning. I should've done what the warning said, just dropped that book right in the garbage on my way back inside through the garage.

But the garage door has a warning, too. The furnace you walk past, warnings all over. The kitchen table has a warning about if you stand on it, the light fixture above the table warns you it might explode or something, and each of the light bulbs in it, everything has a warning. Warnings don't really stop you from doing things wrong. They just give you something to beat yourself up over later.

I stuff the warning back in the mailer, all bound for the garbage can, but not ours, the one at work. Less risky that way. My wife, she'll notice packaging in the trash. She always keeps the packaging for stuff. We have a box for a blender that I don't know why we'd ever put back in the box.

Downstairs, sat on the toilet, the first *Here's Harold* page open across my legs. A drawing of a medieval scene, castles and knights and shit like that. Hundreds of tiny characters the size of maybe a pinky fingernail. All a blur until I put on the readers from my shirt pocket. Then I find him right away, somewhere on the right-hand page, sat up on a castle wall. Harold in his candy cane hat and sweater.

Then there's this knight in full armor on the ground, underneath where Harold sits on the wall. The little metal door over the knight's face hinged open, but you can't see much of his face, just this dark hole with a little outline of an open mouth. Harold's up on the wall with his bare cartoon ass, and he's taking a crap. A long log of shit still attached, but about ready to break off and follow the other already disappearing log into the dark hole of the knight's face mask.

The book's cover, I take another look, and it's normal. Glossy, Harold's face smiling that goofy grin. The front pages of copyright stuff, publisher stuff. All there.

On the same page with the knight, a wizard with a long beard on all fours. A big wizard's staff disappears into the wizard's mouth and comes out behind him, from between his legs, the staff draped with cartoon intestines and covered in a sloppy mess of reds and browns.

On the ends of the staff, Harolds, little groups of them. One pushing the staff further, deeper, the other pushing on the wizard from behind, so all the Harolds force the wizard's staff through the wizard, whose cartoon eyes are open, big blue cartoon tears on his face. Maybe he's not dead yet.

My phone chimes to send me back to work.

The laugh, my laugh, louder than the fart fan in the bathroom.

What's the opposite of funny? A Harold in front of a guy tied on a chair, a pair of huge fireplace tongs in his hand, and pinched between the tongs, a single, big, cartoon tooth?

My laugh surprises me, but not as much as the tip of my dick pressed up against the toilet seat rim. Pressed hard, pressing its way up to smash through the toilet seat.

I didn't know what was the opposite of my naked geometry teacher. Until they sent it to me in a bubble mailer and my dick raged and throbbed against a toilet seat.

That night, the best sex I've ever had.

I sneak downstairs before bed, take out *Here's Harold* from way in the back of the bathroom cabinet. A highway scene. Total mayhem. One image, this guy dragged under a car, a smear of blood and body parts behind an old sedan, and everything works the way it did from when I was a teenager, when boners were a nuisance, when the problem was tucking unwanted boners into your waistband, a hunchbacked walk through school hallways to hide how stiff you were.

I love my wife. I do. It's only the last few years that I've had a little mush dick.

I did what the commercials say, talked to my doctor about medicines, names I wrote down and asked, just like the commercials said, "Do you think Protabostol is right for me?"

You can feel the difference with the pills. She can. I can.

What's the opposite of natural? What's the opposite of a boner from when you see your wife and she's sexy and it just happens?

The boner, like when you're a kid and your dick just flips straight up, doesn't know to stop somewhere before you feel it pressed and warm on your belly.

This combo, a young man's boner and an old man's loving marriage.

That night my wife rolls off me and lays on her back. Her legs wobble the bed. I forgot she used to do this, shakes from her thighs that move the bed underneath both of us.

I blow through the castle scene, then the highway scene, an Egypt scene, and a scene full of aliens, all with horrible Harolds and gore and torture, all before my first real Harold. In real life.

This restaurant I hit most days, it's nothing great, but they crank the A/C, and they have these really good, really juicy cherry tomatoes. One salad, the tomato was so

stuffed in its own skin, so ready to burst, that when my teeth caught it and crunched down, slime and seeds squirted in a stream right out of my mouth and onto the window next to me.

I'm at the same window table, half in my salad, half on the phone, my readers on so I can read the screen, and this guy outside just gets nailed in the crosswalk by an old Crown Vic. Not even a breath on the brakes before the car plows him, and it doesn't slow down after, either.

The driver goes past my window, and it's crazy. But I swear he's got on a candy cane striped hat, poof ball on top. Middle of summer.

A bunch of people run outside, me too. You smell the old car exhaust first. Then I get closer and see all these insides.

Through the bite of salad still in my mouth, I smell his shit, already cooked on the pavement. This dead guy's shit, right there, slopped out from what used to be his insides. The smell from when someone fertilizes the lawn, meatier.

That night on the toilet again, a barbershop scene with Harolds everywhere. This guy in a barber's chair, one eye plucked out on the end of a pair of scissors.

The new best sex of my life. I don't even think about the guy and the car, the real one from real life. I didn't even shower when I got home.

My wife rolls off me and rattles the headboard against the wall, her legs shake so bad.

The next day, half in my salad, half in my phone, I look up the guy who drew *Here's Harold*.

Dutch. Okay, that doesn't help. Crunch through cold, wet lettuce when I see the Dutchman was a classically-trained artist. And of course, he hit it big when he took his doodles, margin notes, nonsense, threw them in a book for kids. Who ate them up with their eyes. That's how the article says it, anyway, "ate them up with their eyes."

Mid scroll, my mouth full of more lettuce and red onion, squeaks from the restaurant kitchen, the sounds from when you watch basketball on TV and the shoes chirp against the wooden floor.

Turns out the Dutchman hated the Harold books. Not right away, but he got tired. All that tiny detail work.

He has a quote in here: "I started to see him. Harold. Once you find Harold, you see him everywhere."

In a section about the Dutchman called "Controversy," which I would've skipped to right off if I'd seen it at the start, there's info about his last book. A special edition.

I spear a stack of lettuce and tomato into my mouth and crunch down. Tomato snaps and bursts in my mouth, sweet and cold.

The Dutch guy says, "I drew the worst shit I could think of. Things so horrible that if people saw, they could never again look at Harold. I told no one."

And what he did is he put all these drawings in a book. The one in my downstairs bathroom, way in the back of the cabinet under the sink.

A bunch of copies got printed, and some places the story is different and the thing got out in the world, but that's probably just "My cousin totally had it" stuff. Most of the stuff online says the book never made distribution.

Another tomato, and I go to crunch down, but it's so firm and ripe it slides between my teeth, hard to get a bite on. The dressing sweet and oily and slick on the tomato's skin.

And I see the guy in the candy cane sweater. And the hat. Right there behind the restaurant bar. Next to him, a guy in a chef's coat, hole on one side of his face that's supposed to be an eye, really, really supposed to not be a hole. The guy in the candy cane sweater and the poof ball hat, he has his arm around the guy in the chef's coat, and he leans in close, stuffs napkins in the dark hole where there's already a pile of napkins folded in blood.

And this tomato in my mouth, I catch it between my back teeth, and it bursts, floods my mouth with salty wetness, a sticky liquid pork.

The Harold and the chef guy, they stare at me. All three of their eyes right on me while I grab for a napkin.

I don't look at *Here's Harold* that night. I can't. I brush my teeth upstairs, wash my face upstairs, even shit up there where it's safe, where there's no book.

After I put her off for a few nights, my wife puts on something special. I don't want to tell you what. Let's just say the opposite of what your wife wears most nights when you both stay up late, watch as many *X-Files* as you can keep your eyes open for.

The sex isn't horrible. It's non existent. Not even a mush dick from me.

The worst part, I go down on my wife, and the taste, normally the taste isn't a thing, but tonight it's a little bit liquid pork, and I cough, then gag, then my wife rolls over.

When she cries, she hides it, the bed quiet and still.

Tuesday night, a drawing of Harolds in an office building. Wednesday morning, a guy in the lobby at my office, kneeled near where he's got the elevator panel off. A guy in a candy cane sweater. I don't want to tell you all the details from the afternoon, it's too sad and too gross. It'd be better if it was opposite. The opposite of *The Shining*, that part where the elevator doors open and a blood tide fills the hall.

Once you find Harold, you see him everywhere. That's what I tell myself.

Wednesday night I skip Harold and pretend to have diarrhea. That's the thing, you can tell your wife you have diarrhea, and she won't cry from that. Wednesday, no Harold book, then Thursday, no Harold in real.

Thursday night I binge Harold, flip pages, see it all, this massive city scene where Harolds outnumber regular people. And Friday, I don't want to tell you all about Friday, just I see this bum in a whole crowd of people, and he has a dog, and then the bum takes off his overcoat and he's wearing the candy cane colors, and he picks up the dog, and it's the opposite of those videos you see where maybe a guy adopts a sweet dog with a peg leg and they live together happy forever.

Friday night I start in on Harold, a page full of Harolds, and each Harold holds hands with a tiny Harold. A baby Harold with a striped cap and sweater, and a striped diaper.

The Harold fathers hold the ends of rifles, point them into crowds of people while their sons pull the triggers. The Harold fathers, they play peek-a-boo, but not with their own hands, someone else's hands that end in bloody stumps at the wrists.

When it's time for beers with Stan again, we meet at the same table. The bar empty, plywood over one window, tire streaks staining the sidewalk outside, right up to the bar's blown in front wall.

Stan's had a few weeks. He sports one of those finger splints you get from the drugstore, and a little cut on his face, maybe from shaving, maybe not from shaving. He shivers in his seat when the Amber Alert siren blares into his thigh. He sets the Spider-Man phone on the table, the screen cracked all to hell, Spider-Man's blue legs scuffed to show the red underneath.

He says, "Guy bumped into me. Damndest thing."

"Wait," I say. Then I stop before I ask about the candy cane sweater, candy cane hat.

Stan's bazooka replaced with a double bourbon. He says, "This guy bumps into me, I drop my phone, and the screen shatters in a million pieces."

Not so bad. On the scale of things, a cracked phone makes for a good day.

Stan sips at his cup, loud, moves his hand up in karate chop position. "Then, this asshole, steps back, scrapes the phone on the ground, then keeps walking, and I see him, this is so crazy, I see him fucking knock over this old man in a wheelchair and just..." Stan goes to chop, then stops, folds his fingers, sets his hand back on the table. "He just starts kicking the shit out of him." Stan sips again, louder this time. "Never seen a beating like it."

Because he hasn't seen the senior rest home pages from *Here's Harold*.

Once you find Harold, you see him everywhere.

Another siren. Another Amber Alert.

Stan brushes his destroyed screen with the side of his hand. He says, "How's the thing? The thing we ordered?"

"It's good," I say. "Really good."

Stan smiles for the first time that night. He's minus a tooth up front. The gum swollen, red. Fresh. I don't ask. "Good." He says. "You're nice together. You deserve it."

"Maybe," I say.

Stan says, "Listen, if you ever want to get out of using it?"

I lean in. Hold my breath.

He says, "Get a girl in her 20's. Worked for me."

The bartender comes and asks if we want another round. Stan says he'll do one more, single this time. The bartender reaches for Stan's glass, his arm covered in small, round burns.

Just past the bartender, out the window, the one that's still glass because nobody drove through, across the way there's a chubby kid on a two-wheel bike, no helmet, and a guy behind him pushing. The guy behind, candy cane hat and sweater, just about ready to let go.

I order the bazooka. Because things are good at home. Bazooka good.

The bartender limps away with our empty glasses, and drips of blood from Stan's face slap the wooden tabletop, almost to the beat of another Amber Alert siren.